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**Date deposited:** 11<sup>th</sup> May 2012

**Version of file:** Final

**Peer Review Status:** Peer reviewed

## Citation for item:

Farr M. (2005) Clann MacKenna's Edwardian Exile. In: O'Neill, P. (ed.) Exile and Homecoming: Papers from the Fifth Australian Conference of Celtic Studies. University of Sydney: The Celtic Studies Foundation, pp.207-224.

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## Edwardian exile: Clann MacKenna's statesman

*Martin Farr*

### **Introduction**

Celtic historiography can appear to a non-Celtic historian – either of background or of research – as often being defined by exile, and by virtue of that, by identity. It may be useful, or at the very least diverting, to consider an example where exile had the opposite effect. The Clann MacKenna, from Truagh, in Ireland, was, and remains, one characterised by – usually forced – migration, a process that encouraged a collective and enduring sense of identity. Its most famous member, however, adopted a quite different aspect.

Reginald McKenna was born in London, on 6 July 1863. He went to Trinity Hall Cambridge, was a barrister at the Inner Temple, became a Liberal MP in 1895, and a minister in 1908. He became First Lord of the Admiralty when the Royal Navy was the greatest on earth, swapping offices with Churchill to become Home Secretary faced with suffragism and the spy hysteria of 1914-1915, and Chancellor of the Exchequer during the key years of the First World War when Britain's economic and military strategies were forged. After leaving parliament in 1918, he became Chairman of Midland Bank, the largest in the world, when he sought to steer economic and political opinion towards a progressive monetary policy between the wars. Reginald McKenna died in London, on 6 September 1943.

Reginald McKenna remains one of the largest omissions in twentieth-century British political biography. Though the most famous member of the clann, McKenna has otherwise suffered considerable neglect. This is largely through the absence of a collection of personal papers. The papers have now been discovered and a reconsideration is possible. One of those areas that were effectively unknown was his Celtic roots and their enduring significance, whether admitted or not. While we know much of his foreground, we know little of his background. This article will therefore attempt to redress one area of neglect, in four sections.

## **Background**

A conventional birth in a most conventional place as a foundation for a conventionally exceptional career in the British ‘establishment’ concealed a diverse path, and a bloodline defined by oppression and exile. It was unlikely, as Reginald McKenna’s paternal grandparents left Ireland for the New World, that a grandson born 43 years later would have anything to do with Britain at all. As one member put it, ‘Clann Mackenna in its dispersal carried the best of its blood into foreign lands up to the twentieth century’.<sup>1</sup> Other branches of the McKenna family had already dispersed to Australia and Chile, while Catholics, still denied emancipation on their own island, saw the opportunities offered by the United States in only its second decade of independence as too strong to resist. Yet William Columban M’Kenna managed to resist it. He returned to Ireland, and then finally, across a much narrower sea, to England.

The distant and colourful mythology of the family certainly did nothing to suggest that its most celebrated member would be a London banker and financier. The Clann Mhic Chionaoith was descended from Colla da Chrioch.<sup>2</sup> Tradition suggested that they originated from the southern Uí Neill, but belonged to the territory of Truagh, in south Ulster, northern County Monaghan, and may have been descended from Brian Ború or Ollam Fodlah,<sup>3</sup> or from the fearsome ‘MacKenna of Truagh’ whose deer-hunting expedition led him from Meath into Monaghan, or perhaps from the Firbolg, the native Neolithic race driven into the mountains by the Gaels.<sup>4</sup> Another story had it that the MacKennas had a feud with the O’Donnells, lured them in a hunting expedition, and then massacred them. The MacKennas ran home yelling ‘Faustina Venatio’, which subsequently

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<sup>1</sup> E Mackenna Mietziner, quoted in C E Swezey III, *The Mackennas of Truagh* (privately printed, 2nd ed, 1977) p52.

<sup>2</sup> J O’Hart, *Irish Pedigrees* (Dublin, 1881) p669. For much advice and corrections of fact and interpretation concerning the Irish ancestry of Reginald McKenna, the author is grateful to Mr Vincent Mac Niocaill, Mr James Quain, Mr Gerry McKenna, and Mr Patrick Mac Cionnaith for their very kind assistance.

<sup>3</sup> Reginald McKenna (henceforth RMcK) to Stephen McKenna (henceforth SMcK), 8 April 1941; E MacLysaght, *Irish Families* (Dublin, 1957) p197.

<sup>4</sup> S Leslie, *The End of a Chapter* ([1916] London, 1929) pp1, 165. S Leslie, *Long Shadows* (London, 1966) p5. McKennas proliferate, and appear to have originated, generally, in County Monaghan. A society exists, Clann MacKenna, to record the fate of those who, in its words, ‘are a dispersed people sent [,] in slavery to Barbados [,] in chains to Australia [,] in famine to America’.

became the family motto. From the eighth century, the clann settled and lived in the barony of Truagh, in the phrase of one descendent ‘more or less turbulently ever afterwards’.<sup>5</sup>

It was there that in the McKenna ballads, *The Merrow Queen*, the Macha fell for a Chief Neal McKenna as a romantic hero, who rejects English ways in *The Romance of the Lake Horse*.<sup>6</sup>

The plains and woods of Truagh are ours,  
Won by our father’s stalwarth hands;  
And neither man nor mystic powers,  
Shall spoil M’Kenna’s lands

At the end of the sixteenth century, the family were considerable landowners in the region; a position that, beginning with the surrender to and re-grant of lands by Queen Elizabeth I in 1591, the enforcement of primogeniture, the transfer of title through sale to adventurers, mortgages, and confiscation for those who participated in various resistance movements throughout the seventeenth century, came to an end with the direct involvement of Oliver Cromwell. Owen Mac Kenna was a descendant of Patrick, Chief of the Mac Kennas, and died around 1625. His children were Theobald and Michael, both of whom had sons named after themselves. The next generation included Theobald’s sons Stephen Joseph Mac Kenna, who was a captain in the British Army and died in 1883, and John, who became Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant. Michael’s son was himself Michael, Reginald’s grandfather, who was born in Monaghan in 1789 and died in Dublin in 1854. With his wife, Mary, he had seven children, including Joseph and William, Reginald McKenna’s father.

Perhaps, at least partly, in consequence, no McKenna rose to a position of power between the first half of the seventeenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century. In addition to the success of Reginald and his brother Theodore, three Stephens became noted writers – including the translator of Plotinus, and the novelist, who wrote a memoir of his uncle Reginald – a Patrick was an active associate of Wolfe Tone and Napper Tandy, while McKenna’s own grandmother, Mary Plunkett Gregan, was a collateral descendant of Saint Oliver Plunkett.<sup>7</sup> More recently, there was the actor T P McKenna, and Virginia McKenna, an actress of note, who

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<sup>5</sup> SMcK to RMcK, 14 December 1932.

<sup>6</sup> Dr Dáithí Ó hÓgáin to Gerry McKenna, 8 October 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Guy Collis to David McKenna [henceforth DMcK], 20 September 1990.

demonstrated that while many of her kin had left in chains, some were born free.

Starvation encouraged a general dispersal, with emigration westward to the Americas and eastward to Britain. John McKenna became General Juan McKenna in the Chilean Army before perishing in a duel at Buenos Aires in 1814, but not before, as Vicuña McKenna, with Bernard O'Higgins, he was hailed as a father of the country in its struggle against the Spanish. Don Juan McKenna married Josefa Vicuña Larrain in 1809, and Benjamin Vicuña MacKenna was born in 1831. The McKennas of the Americas remained a source of fascination for those so fascinated, including Benjamin Vicuña McKenna, who travelled to London to do so.<sup>8</sup> It was an obstacle to those so interested, that no Parish Registers were kept in Ireland until the mid-nineteenth century, and so there was little in the way of reliable personal information. Even without those and other émigrés, at the turn of the twentieth century in Monaghan, of a population of 76 211, 2500 were McKennas. Any Irishman who 'want[ed] to take his lineage back to the year of Bosworth Field,' Stephen McKenna concluded, 'had better – like other men – invent it: nobody will be any the wiser.'<sup>9</sup>

This shared disinterest can be seen as critical. Reginald McKenna had little interest in invention, or, after that, in self-promotion. What came to be his limitations as a politician were also his boundaries as a MacKenna. When enquiries were received from Irishmen more typically concerned with their roots, they were passed on to relatives with the time and inclination.<sup>10</sup> McKenna was largely unconcerned with the more arcane aspects of his genealogy; he was a man who regarded all aspects of genealogy as arcane.

Notwithstanding his lack of interest in his own heritage – or, indeed, in the past – there were some portents for him from within the family. McKenna's uncle, Sir Joseph Neale McKenna, was born in 1817, and claimed to be a lineal descendant of the last Prince of Truagh. Daniel O'Connell, 'The Liberator', exercised patronage of a comparable order to those he had replaced, and Joseph was placed in charge of the National Bank of Ireland when it extended its interests into Britain. So assiduous was O'Connell's patronage that his grandson Daniel married one of Sir

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<sup>8</sup> Mabel McKenna to Chairman, Midland Bank, 30 July 1950.

<sup>9</sup> SMcK to RMcK, 5 April 1941.

<sup>10</sup> RMcK to 'SD', 1927; Eoin O'Mahony to RMcK, 29 March 1941; RMcK to SMcK, 3 April 1941; SMcK to RMcK, 5 April 1941; RMcK to Eoin O'Mahony, 7 April 1941; RMcK to SMcK, 7 April 1941.

Joseph's daughters, Helen, and McKenna retained O'Connell cousins throughout his life. After serving as Chairman of the National Bank, Sir Joseph was elected Irish nationalist MP. In his first successful election, Sir Joseph defeated Isaac Butt, and in 1868 was himself defeated by Christopher Weguelin, whose election was subsequently declared void on account of bribery.<sup>11</sup> In 1873, Sir Joseph was returned to Parliament first for Youghal and then South Monaghan from 1885 to 1892.

As an MP, Sir Joseph was something of a nuisance to his parliamentary allies, the Liberal Party, and was a supporter of Charles Parnell both before and after the split. Preferment apparently eluding him, Sir Joseph made his special interest greater equality for Irish taxpayers when compared to their English neighbours. His advice over land reform was sought by Gladstone,<sup>12</sup> although the tardiness with which Sir Joseph felt British governments treated the issue became a source of regular and indignant public statements, and towards the end of his career he condemned Gladstone, the act of Union, and the general financial oppression of the Irish people.<sup>13</sup> At Ardoginna House, County Waterford, which had been part of the Plan of Campaign in the aftermath of Boycott, Sir Joseph and Lady McKenna hosted parties with the avenue of fir trees lit by 500 torches.<sup>14</sup> Their mission to free Ireland did not preclude festivity.

Michael McKenna saw his first son Joseph born in Dublin before travelling to the United States with his family. William Columban, McKenna's father, had been born in 1820, the son of Michael M'Kenna of Dublin. Unlike many Irishmen, Michael returned from the New World, and, en route, his second son William was born, who was given the name 'Columban' by way of recording the fact. Michael settled in Dublin with his seed business while William crossed the Irish Sea to England in 1838. Although his sisters were nuns, Michael M'Kenna appeared to have left his

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<sup>11</sup> *The Times* (17 August 1906).

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Neal McKenna to W E Gladstone, 27 May 1871: W E Gladstone papers, British Library additional manuscript 44430, folio 269.

<sup>13</sup> In two snappily entitled pamphlets: *The Irish Land Question where the Requisite Funds for its Solution are to be Found without Trenching on or Imperilling the Proceeds of British Taxes the Question Considered and Answered in Connection with Mr Gladstone's Taxation of Ireland from 1853 to the Present Time* (London, ND) and *Imperial Taxation: The Case of Ireland Plainly Stated for the Information of the English People and of those Others whom it May Concern*, (London, 1883).

<sup>14</sup> The author is grateful to Carole O'Reilly for these references.

faith across the Atlantic, and, significantly, the family henceforth displayed little in the way of religious observance, or, indeed, much respect for institutions of any kind.

In a notable example of reverse placement, an Irishman assisted an Irishman to office and authority in England. At the age of 19, and with the encouragement and support of Daniel O'Connell himself in the form of a nomination, William found himself in the Board of Stamps and Taxes as a supernumerary surveyor.<sup>15</sup> With the reinstatement of income tax in 1842, a position as a surveyor of taxes was a significant one, and one which, given the geographical ambit each of the 140 surveyors in England and Wales was given, had a vaguely feudal air. Promotion was steady. By 1845, M'Kenna had qualified as assistant surveyor, and by 1848 became district surveyor in King's Lynn, followed, in 1852, by Bristol, Stoke upon Trent, and, in 1859, Sheffield. A well-paid, solid career had been complemented around 1850 by marriage to Emma Hanby, who claimed to be a descendent of Foxe, of the *Book of Martyrs*.

With a solid private and professional life apparently to hand, M'Kenna's career as a taxman came to a sudden end. While in Sheffield, M'Kenna investigated the accounts of the South Yorkshire Railway Company and discovered tax arrears of £12 828. In addition to a salary, a surveyor could be rewarded in kind for the discovery of notable tax evasion, and M'Kenna's case was a promising one. In attempting to pursue the monies, M'Kenna found arrayed against him local landowners and industrialists, who had grown to accommodate the laxity of the earlier surveying regime of William Chadwick.<sup>16</sup> The links between the interests of the Railway Company in Sheffield and Westminster were such that M'Kenna was encouraged not to find closure, lest in so doing he cause embarrassment. He resisted insofar as he was able, and resigned shortly after.

The nature of M'Kenna's leaving the Board of Stamps and Taxes was in accordance with his career to that point. By nature impulsive, even impetuous, M'Kenna possessed little in the way of natural deference to

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<sup>15</sup> For much of what follows regarding William Columban McKenna, the author is greatly indebted to Dr Robert Colley for sharing his research. Such biographical information as is presented here concerning RMcK's father is due to Dr Colley's detective work in nineteenth-century tax records. Other information came from Dr Colley's article on William M'Kenna in *Clann MacKenna* 7 (year) 24-27.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Colley, pers comm, 30 July 1999.

authority, particularly when authority conducted itself in the manner of the Board and the South Yorkshire Railway Company. Circumlocution was not an evident quality in his character, and, in his professional dealings, he was inclined to antagonise those with whom he dealt. The events of 1860 proved to be the extent of his inclination to push the boundaries of administration against the limitations of statute, and his life continued in this manner. Following the death of his first-born, William ‘had taken his revenge on Omnipotence’, as his nephew Stephen put it,<sup>17</sup> renounced Catholicism, and converted to Protestantism.

M’Kenna’s disposition was supplemented by his wealth, which provided for such public demonstrations of will. Judicious investments in the stock exchange had ensured a comfortable life, but his prosperity came to as abrupt an end as had his career as a surveyor, and was again born of an impetuous, ambitious character. The collapse of Overand Gurney & Co brought a dramatic change to the life the family had been living, and for which it had planned. It was a disaster that would never have had adverse consequences if William Columban had served his covenanted term at the Inland Revenue and retired on a civil service pension. Towards the end of his life, he helped raise a fighting fund for Charles Bradlaugh, the atheist MP, and, on reading of the Turkish massacre of Bulgars, he had to be restrained from leaving on a mission to the Balkans.<sup>18</sup> The sensibilities of an enforced exile never left him.

The size of the family accentuated the effect of William’s stock market misfortunes. There were nine children, of whom Reginald was the youngest, the others Leopold, Alice, Mary, Theodore, Gerald, and Ernest. Two – including the first-born – died in infancy. They went separate ways, and, with the exception of Ernest and Reginald, recognisably the youngest of the litter, did not stay particularly close.<sup>19</sup> Encouraged by the further erosion of family assets in the Overand Gurney financial crisis, Emma took the four youngest to Brittany, with William, Leopold and Theodore remaining in London, sending weekly remittances to France. It was not an unknown environment. While Emma, contrary to some reports,<sup>20</sup> was not French, she had been educated there. The family went from lodging to lodging, shedding children as they grew old enough to make their own way.

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<sup>17</sup> SMcK, *Reginald McKenna* (henceforth *RMcK*) (London, 1948) p36.

<sup>18</sup> SMcK, *RMcK*, pp36, 27.

<sup>19</sup> Sister K N McKenna to DMcK, 23 March 1972.

<sup>20</sup> R Jenkins, *The Chancellors* (London, 1999).



The three youngest boys and their sisters lived for a while with their parents in London, at Field Court, Grey's Inn, with Leo and Theo cleaning and cooking while William foraged a living. Well into the 1880s, Reginald noted:

I can never forget that [Leopold's] labour supported the whole family of us in our times of need. He never failed to send us 3 youngest ones our weekly pocket-money out of his own pocket, when troubles were sufficient to make him forget and money was scarce enough to make -/6 a week a consideration'.<sup>21</sup>

Henceforth, money was always a priority for the youngest of the family. 'I like staying with rich people', Reginald said many years later. 'If they've made their money, I want to know how they've made it. If they've inherited it, I want to know how they've kept it'.<sup>22</sup>

Emma had to raise the family alone after William died in 1887.<sup>23</sup> She settled at Villa McKenna, at Etrétat in Normandy, from the shores of which the young Reginald grew into a strong swimmer and developed what would be a lifelong love of the sea. He remained devoted to her, spending any spare time visiting her in Maçon, to where she had moved as a widow. In addition to the paternal income, Emma and Reginald depended on the financial support of the elder brothers, ensuring in its way that Reginald had perhaps the most comfortable childhood of all. The closeness of the family remained, and their strong sense of loyalty one might describe as a post-clann spirit.

The process of young Reginald's assimilation nevertheless began with yet further exile. Reginald was educated at St Malo in France until he was 11, and, with brother Ernest, at Ebersdorf near Bamberg in Germany until he was 14. A continental private education did not suggest great wealth; rather, that the equivalent could not be afforded in Britain. Fluency in French and German rather than in Latin and Greek would prove significant, as would the fact that, unlike his future colleagues, school

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<sup>21</sup> RMcK, quoted in SMcK, *RMcK*, p26.

<sup>22</sup> RMcK, quoted in SMcK, *RMcK*, p49.

<sup>23</sup> *The Times* (12 April 1937). She was also the godmother of Mary Lardner-Clarke, nee Augusta, d1950. Mary Lardner-Clarke to RMcK, April [1908].

would afford no contacts or connections: 45 years later he wrote, 'I do not think that I have met a single one of my school-fellows since I left'.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, the early foreign adventures made necessary by the spontaneous behaviour of McKenna's father had several consequences. Firstly, McKenna was always conscious of the significance of money, both professionally and personally, buffeted as the family was for want of it throughout his childhood and early adulthood. Secondly, he was aware of the proximity of Europe, and as a politician was consequently both concerned and informed about Britain's relationship with it. The languages he learnt and the outlook he adopted were more of an incubus when Britain was preoccupied with foreign threats. Only R B Haldane, of his political peers, had so continental an outlook, and suffered similarly for it. Thirdly, the education was unusual for one who would become a public figure. Although the homogeneity of professional London was slowly being diluted in the social revolution of the twentieth century, a non-public school education, typified by a grasp of modern rather than of classical languages, was a disadvantage. That he subsequently partook in two of the typical latter stages of the life course – Cambridge and the Bar – accentuated this. It compounded the interior sensitivity that the youngest child of a large and financially insecure family felt about the world outside, which, with his roots, contributed to the starch generated to maintain a defence.

The family was his social foundation. Without the education of his peers, where friendships were made early on, and which were assisted by continuities in British professional life, McKenna's youth was fractured. While he made many acquaintances, McKenna never had intimate lifelong friends. Early on, he developed attachments with older men, for whom young McKenna offered the promise of the protégé. Dilke was the most obvious, but there was also Henry Labouchere. Later on there was J A Spender, the journalist, and Jacky Fisher and John Jellicoe, the sailors. After rancorous early dealings, he found mutual interests with Bonar-Law. Walter Runciman began and ended as McKenna's closest political associate, but after 1918, they seldom had occasion to meet professionally. John Maynard Keynes began as a professional associate, and the two retained cordial personal relations cemented by close professional interests; Edwin Lutyens proved to be a brick, in several senses.

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<sup>24</sup> RMcK to August Freytag, 22 December 1922; RMcK to John Marriott, 5 March 1929.

With Ernest's assistance, family finances had recovered sufficiently for McKenna to return to England and complete his education at the King's College School, a day school then on the Strand, before it moved to Wimbledon Common. It was not a school that at that time added greatly to the personnel of state and society, and as an adult, McKenna seldom came across a contemporary.<sup>25</sup> He was evidently an exemplary student, yet while he won the classics prize in the Easter of 1878 – and *Napier's Battles and Sieges* – his real talent and interest lay elsewhere. Reginald's obvious gift was for mathematics, and his attraction to it and comfort with it was cited by both supporters and detractors subsequently. Correspondingly obviously, his interest was more in applied than in pure mathematics, an even less publicly marketable commodity. Having won the school arithmetic prize in 1879, he acquired a mathematics scholarship to Trinity Hall Cambridge in 1882. The scholarship was critical, with funds far from readily available. His isolation was more than financial, however. 'I settled up my account', he wrote two years later, 'and found the outlook not at all promising'.<sup>26</sup>

Trinity Hall Cambridge was a small College, with a reputation for producing rowers and lawyers, of which Reginald McKenna became both. Behind a sober eighteenth-century façade, the Court, and the Screens, stood an Elizabethan library and buildings that originated in the fourteenth century. There were physically more impressive colleges, but it was impressive enough for a young man from no significant school and with no existing friends, who was small, balding, prone to eczema, plagued by a persistent stammer and without natural skills in many of the recognised areas of cultivated society. There were no grounds for arrogance, and no suggestion: 'I am beginning to be more than doubtful about my capabilities', he admitted.<sup>27</sup> Yet it was at Cambridge that McKenna came of age, and he always bore the imprint of Hall, oar and bar, while remaining slightly at odds, and ever with the edginess of the outsider:

Tait was talking to-day about the old English families evidently with great respect for them. I am afraid I am not much inclined that way. To be rich is something, but to merely belong to a family who have lived in such and such a place for 500 years, what is it? Provided a man is well bred and has sufficient

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<sup>25</sup> RMcK to John Marriott, 5 March 1929.

<sup>26</sup> RMcK, diary, 15 January 1884.

<sup>27</sup> RMcK, diary, 17 January 1884.

money to support himself in comfort he is in quite as good a position as the bluest blooded man in the world.<sup>28</sup>

One of McKenna's most obvious characteristics as an adult was a pronounced disinclination to self-analysis. He had never been tempted to write a memoir, and his correspondence very seldom displayed signs of personal reflection. While an undergraduate, however, he kept a diary, which he continued intermittently until 1888. It constitutes the only evidence yet discovered of his inner thoughts. 'A diary is a great undertaking', the twenty-one-year-old wrote in January 1884. 'I am afraid I shall be very awkward at writing my day's experiences at first'.<sup>29</sup> A more self-conscious and less spontaneous beginning to a journal could not be imagined. The man regarded by friends and adversaries as self-assured to a fault gave no portent of that as an undergraduate. A natural inclination to look up to his peers was qualified only by despair at their shortcomings with the oar. McKenna's introspection extended to his work: 'Practice has done a little for me, but I am certain now I am not any good for mathematics.'

Perhaps the most striking feature of the diary, between accounts of rowing expeditions, was the author's strong religious convictions. McKenna did not grow up into a religious man, indeed professed agnosticism, although a number of his school and college friends who kept in touch had become men of the cloth.<sup>30</sup> He attended church occasionally in later life, largely through his enjoyment of Canon Hannay's Old Testament stories at Mells Church. Nothing, certainly, to place in context the vividness of his private thoughts:

I believe in God who worketh in all things. I believe Jesus Christ to be one with God; for so he declared himself, and I believe his testimony to be true. I believe that in June 1884 I had a spiritual experience unknown to me before. It was as a revelation of the truth of God and of Jesus Christ; passing all certainty that might come from reasoning; all sufficing in itself, and giving peace to my spirit, such as I had never known before, nor ever since in the same degree. I live in the hope that God will repeat this revelation of Himself within me and

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<sup>28</sup> RMcK, diary, 17 January 1884.

<sup>29</sup> RMcK, diary, 15 January 1884.

<sup>30</sup> Sidney Swann, Percy Stanley; H H Asquith to Sir John Simon, 26 June 1915: Simon papers, Trinity College Cambridge 51, folio 76.

that he will give me strength to throw aside the bondage of my flesh, that I may follow with pure heart and single mind the guidance of the spirit.<sup>31</sup>

Frequently, he wrote 'Remember the Oath', 'Pray God His Will be done with me.'<sup>32</sup> Almost as striking as the existence of such belief was the silence that soon followed on the subject. Whatever happened to shake his faith, he retained his devotion to self-improvement, through apparently painful auto-didacticism.

In other respects the statesman and financier was the undergraduate. One feature of prominence later in life was the triumph of application over natural shortcomings. Just as he had with his speech, McKenna devoted himself to improving his productivity. By his own account, and by any reasonable measure, he was an extraordinarily diligent student. 'Only five and a half hours work', he confessed one Saturday.<sup>33</sup> 'Hard work ... is good, not for the improvement in mathematics itself but for the taste it gives one for other work. I never feel so inclined to sit down and read a stiff book on any subject whatever as I do after a couple of hours of maths'.<sup>34</sup>

Ascetic, slight, balding, and afflicted by a stammer, the isolated figure compensated by his athleticism, excelling in rowing. In a party of 20, McKenna was the ten-stone-five-pounds bow in the university eight that beat Oxford by three and a half lengths in 1887. Some relatives, mistakenly, claimed he had learned to count as bow.<sup>35</sup>

McKenna finished a senior optime mathematician, with rowing occupying more of his time than a top class degree would have allowed. Yet whether the subject was mathematics, billiards, chess, bridge or rowing, the attraction was in the precision of process. Throughout his life, Reginald McKenna was fascinated by process, certainly when compared with heritage or identity. It helped to explain his interest in architecture: in the conception and realisation of a large and complex project. It was demonstrated in those areas of his life where he worked and where he played. The interest was not solely lineal, since he took much pleasure, if not in music, theatre and art per se, in the skills of others to achieve great things in them. It was why he became an efficient barrister, minister and

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<sup>31</sup> RMcK, diary, 3 September 1885.

<sup>32</sup> RMcK, diary, 30 November 1884.

<sup>33</sup> RMcK, diary, 17 January 1884.

<sup>34</sup> RMcK, diary, 16 January 1884.

<sup>35</sup> Leslie, *End of a Chapter*, 78; Louis Fawcus to RMcK, 6 July 1941.

banker, and would have been a more than efficient civil servant. His interests, as with his sense of self, emphasised practice over theory, to the detriment, therefore, of identity.

### **Foreground**

Assimilation, once begun, was irreversible, not that McKenna had any inclination to reverse it. McKenna became part of Edwardian Britain's – perhaps more accurately Edwardian London's – *demi monde*. A world of country houses and town houses and bridge parties and new friends, the most notable of whom was Edwin Lutyens, the 'Architect of Empire', with whom McKenna would construct several significant buildings and family homes.

The path of preferment was typical, if not the effects. Most strikingly, he appeared at some point to have abandoned religion, as had his grandfather and father before him. An appreciation many years later of the oratorical skills of Canon Hannay at Mells Church in Somerset, and of the melodrama of the Old Testament, remained the only legacy. His agnosticism thereafter appeared much more in keeping with his attitudes and personality more generally.

With elevation from the back to the front benches, McKenna became a Minister of the Crown, and, shortly afterwards, 'Right Honourable'. This designation of a member of the Privy Council was the only title he would ever accept, and one that he always used.

Political preferment was complemented by social advancement. Through his patron, Asquith, first as the leading Liberal, then as Liberal leader and Prime Minister, McKenna was introduced to what was often referred to as 'London Society'. Combined with his natural aptitude at bridge, McKenna became a regular at dinner parties, in both town and country. One of the town and country families with whom Asquith was friendly was the Jekyll family of Munstead. The most famous was Gertrude, the garden designer, but Sir Herbert had some acquaintance with the home of the Clann as Private Secretary to Lord-Lieutenants of Ireland.

Sir Herbert was in fact only 16 years Reginald's senior. He was, however, a talented artist, and with his wife, Agnes – the youngest daughter of William Graham – and his sister, Gertrude, was very much of the circles that encompassed the arts and politics, and included the likes of Burne

Jones and Lutyens.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, Sir Herbert was private secretary to Lord Crewe in Dublin, and effective governor during Crewe's lengthy absences. While there, the Jekylls became much enamoured of Dublin intellectual life – Yeats, A E Russell, Sarah Purser, Irving, Ellen Terry Paderewski, Hardy, with Morley, Asquiths, Birrells, and Haldanes not far behind. Nevertheless, the new member of Clann MacKenna saw 'no reason why Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Clare, Kerry, and Cork should not become the playground of England'.<sup>37</sup>

Sir Herbert's daughter, Pamela, became the object of McKenna's affections after his mother died. Theirs was an unusual pairing. Beautiful, musical, and spiritual, Pamela was part of a closely related group of middle class aesthetes. Balding, tone-deaf, and utilitarian, her appeal for McKenna was obvious. Their courting, conducted while he was President of the Board of Education and she was still at school, nevertheless produced a long and conspicuously happy marriage.

Within a year of their wedding, McKenna and Pamela had issue. The boys were prodigiously intelligent and talented. As successive captains of Eton, they could be said to have completed the path trodden by their forefathers. Personally, David was much more like his father; yet with Michael there came a curious and unfortunate echo of McKenna's own religious afflictions, with a religious conversion coinciding with a manic conversion, and a self-induced death at 21. His son's passing was the only shadow on McKenna's later years, and part of his wide cultural patronage included a Michael McKenna Scholarship at the Royal College of Music, where 'Mikey' had shown such ability.

The importance of his clan had not dissipated with its dispersal. After, and only after, he lost his mother, McKenna found another woman to be at the centre of his life, and his new family provided the foundation for the rest of it.

The law was a — perhaps necessary — prelude to concerns that had become increasingly important to him whilst at College: politics and finance. To the ends of the latter, McKenna considered for a time following his brothers into the City. When he chose law, it was only as a prelude to

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<sup>36</sup> R Gradidge, *Edwin Lutyens Architect Laureate* (London, 1981) pp26-27, 74-75; F Horner, *Time Remembered* (London, 1933) *passim*.

<sup>37</sup> Algernon West, diary, 25 July 1893: ed H G Hutchinson, *Private Diaries of the Rt. Hon. Sir Algernon West, G.C.B.*, "A Greville – with a Warmer Heart" (London, 1922) p178.

parliament. Inspired by the poverty he witnessed in South London, and assisted by his friendship with Sir Charles Dilke, McKenna was selected as the Liberal candidate for North Monmouthshire in South Wales, a constituency he described as

entirely industrial, mainly mining, with a fair sprinkling of steel-workers, tin-plate workers, and railwaymen ... Although it is a county constituency, it is more like a borough than an ordinary county division. Nearly the whole of the electorate is contained in a valley not more than two or three miles wide and twelve miles long.<sup>38</sup>

A McKenna had returned to Celtic lands. Indeed, the Government of which he was part – for many, the most able of any in the twentieth century – was avowedly one of the Celtic fringe. Fronted first by a Scot, then by a Scottish MP, before being led – and broken – by a Welshman, the government was preoccupied with two issues of Celtic politics: the granting of Home Rule to Ireland and the breaking of the Church of England in Wales.

It was part of McKenna's rejection of homecoming that he displayed so little interest in those emotive issues. He was a Home Ruler, certainly, and the actual minister who led Disestablishment in Wales, but never displayed more than a collective loyalty to their prosecution. The issue that alone animated him was Free Trade, a legacy of his logical mind and mathematical training. When he failed to show his fellow Welsh MPs due sensitivity, he had to be rescued by the greatest politician of his generation. David Lloyd George could employ the rhetoric and conviction that his nominally Welsh colleague conspicuously lacked. The distinction was essential.

Lloyd George proved to be McKenna's most critical Celtic connection, and the effect was destructive, in that their cleavage brought about the destruction of the Asquith coalition in 1916, and the end of the Liberals as a party of Government. Each man had abandoned much of his Celtic history, but Lloyd George recognised the importance of retaining the association, and was a master of myth and impression. Born in England, and abandoning Young Wales opportunistically when his own career was in its infancy, Lloyd George nevertheless retained an appreciation of his cultural constituency, which, while as much a matter of convenience for him as it was for McKenna, was part of the much more effective personal

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<sup>38</sup> RMcK to Geoffrey Howard, 16 April 1919.



iconography he traced. Their respective probity helped. Untainted by even the rumour of corruption or scandal, McKenna was a devoted son and – far from being another Don Juan McKenna – only married after the death of his mother, and became a devoted husband. Lloyd George was so devoted to the idea of family that he had more than one.

Suitably enough, the two had superficially a great deal in common. They were born of the Celtic fringe seven months apart and died only 18 months apart. Both were elected as Liberal MPs for Welsh constituencies, Lloyd George in 1890, McKenna five years later. The two were associates in opposition, radicals of note, respectively defending the Boers and attacking Protection. Both became ministers in December 1905. Both were thrown out of cabinet during the life of a Government, never to return. Neither ever really left the margins of Westminster life even when notionally at the centre; neither was a Commons man.

At first they were, together, the ‘able and brilliant freelances under the gangway’, as Spender put it.<sup>39</sup> As the embodiment of Welsh liberalism, Lloyd George had stood unsuccessfully as the head of a federation of them: it would later be recognised as a great irony that McKenna had nominated Lloyd George as his leader.<sup>40</sup> By the end of their time as colleagues, the latter’s mistress wrote of McKenna that ‘D[avid] literally hates him & I do not think he will rest till he has utterly broken him’.<sup>41</sup> McKenna thought himself ‘an acknowledged authority [on] ruining Lloyd George’,<sup>42</sup> although events tended to suggest otherwise. The transformation of a relationship was most pointed when viewed over a decade, but the cleavage between Lloyd George and McKenna was ever present. In time, it would become clear that there was not room for both men in the same cabinet, the same party, or, as it was to prove, in the same world.

This difference in outlook was magnified by a great contrast in personality, with Lloyd George again approximating ‘Celtic’ qualities of lyricism, impetuosity, and genius, and McKenna a more conventional stolid efficiency. McKenna’s nephew contrasted with succinct accuracy how ‘a

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<sup>39</sup> J A Spender and C Asquith, *Life of Herbert Henry Asquith, Lord Oxford & Asquith* (2 volumes: London, 1932) vol II p86.

<sup>40</sup> D Cregler, *Bounder from Wales: Lloyd George’s career before the First World War* (Columbia, 1976) p62.

<sup>41</sup> Frances Stevenson, diary, 21 November 1916: ed A J P Taylor, *Lloyd George: A Diary by Frances Stevenson* (London, 1971) p126.

<sup>42</sup> RMcK to Repington, quoted in M Kettle, *Salome’s Last Veil: the Libel Case of the Century* (London, 1977) p47.

mind that saw everything in pictures, clashed with one that saw everything in figures; emotion was brought down to earth daily by calculation'.<sup>43</sup>

So it was that, through the antagonism of his fellow Celt and principal opponent, McKenna was exiled from Wales, just as surely as he had been from Ireland, and with very similar consequences: opportunity. Both times he moved on, and up, and without reproach. McKenna's defeat by Lloyd George marked a final repudiation of any connection with his ancestral lands. Far from valley or glen, he henceforth resided in the City, where his final years were happily lucrative. It is far from an obscure psychological insight to suggest that his wealth was employed in redressing the idea of home, as the architect *manqué* took great pleasure in building three.

### **Conclusion**

It is hoped that, through this raking, a minor stone – more a pebble – in Celtic historiography has been turned. Reginald McKenna was clearly an exile without homecoming. He rejected his own past, and showed no interest in contemporary resonances in his adult life. He did, however, cultivate his own, new, clan, which became the most important thing in his life. Exiled by money, he became wealthy; exiled from a home, he built several.

Like the clann, McKenna was always defined by distance. Never really from Ireland, despite being from it; never really of Wales, despite being of it; far from anywhere as a schoolboy in France and Germany; never really accepted by a society that found his rootless ethnicity as uncongenial as it did his stammer and eczema. He always had to work much harder than most of his peers to achieve comparable position. When he did, finally, find a milieu in which he was comfortable, he was regarded anew as somewhat semi-detached. In a final gesture to the strength of myth, McKenna died a commoner, refusing all honours; Lloyd George died an earl.

And so a conventionally exceptional career, with 40 years at the apex of British public life, had more tangled roots than might at first appear, and remains distinctive. Clann MacKenna's most distinguished son remained lost to Celtic historiography, perhaps because for Reginald McKenna exile was far from banishment.

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<sup>43</sup> SMcK, *RMcK*, p14.